

Herder on Language and Nation

Emperor Joseph II enacted German as the language of administration in all of the Habsburg lands beginning from 1 Nov. 1784.¹ While German had become a common language in the western parts of the empire, the new regulation began to force German in place of Latin in the Kingdom of Hungary, home to the Slovaks among numerous other groups, where the latter was the main language of administration and higher education.

The German philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803), at home in Riga, the capital of Latvia today, commented on Joseph II's reforms after his death in 1790. The essay, phrased as a dialogue, contains a passage on the law on German with a condensed exposition of Herder's views on the role of language in the perceptions of a people (*Volk*, but sometimes also *Nation* in Herder's usage). It and Herder's thoughts in his other works became core concepts in the definition of a people among the Germans and other Central Europeans. Their activists translated *Volk* as *národ* and *nemzet* into the Austrian monarchy's Slavic languages and Hungarian, words that are commonly translated as *nation* in English but effectively comprised what is called an ethnic group or linguistic group in other contexts. The emerging *národ*s counted millions of people then, but were not defined by their citizenship, unlike *nation* in modern American usage.²

Modern sources requote (there are practically no quotations from the original) partly refashioned segments from the passage – only from the sequences marked in brown below. The broader context shows that Herder identified his *Volk* with the “simple” masses that became a focus of the Enlightenment and so, implicitly, defined a nation and its attributes as separate from the identity of the nobles and intellectuals, who soon became the main promoters of the new concept of group identity in Central Europe and included themselves in it.

The following is a translation [M.V.] from the German original. The passage begins with discussant “A” posing a question to “B” (Herder's mouthpiece) about the negative reactions to Joseph II's 1784 law on German in the Kingdom of Hungary.

Conversation after the Death of Emperor Joseph II.

[...]

A: What innocent³ biases did he [*Joseph II*] offend?

B: I will mention only a few out of many; first the bias towards language. **Is a people,⁴ especially an uncultivated people, more fond of anything than the language of its fathers?**

¹ Cf. the full text of the regulation and Joseph II's comments on his own decision at <http://www.pitt.edu/~votruba/ssttopics/lawsonlanguageinslovakia.html>

² Cf. a brief comparison of the American and Central European concepts of a nation at <http://www.pitt.edu/~votruba/qsonhist/slovaknationalityethnicityenglishtranslation.html>

³ The meaning is “of the simple masses,” the *innocents* as the intellectuals called the little-educated population at large.

⁴ *Volk* in the original.

Its complete wealth of views on tradition, history, religion, and principles of life reside in language, all of the people's heart and soul. To take away or derogate the language of such a people means to take away all of the people's eternal assets, what is passed on from parent to child.

A: And yet, Joseph knew many of those peoples personally and very well.

B: The more surprising it is then that he did not discern the interference, that he held it among his favorite laws. "Who suppresses my language (the simple man⁵ thinks, not without reason) also wants to rob me of my mind and way of life, of my honor and the rights of my people." Indeed, as God tolerates all the languages of the world, a ruler, then, should not merely tolerate but actually honor the diverse languages of his peoples.

A: But he wanted to bring about a speedier execution of business, speedier culture.

B: The best culture of a people is not speedy, it cannot be enforced through a foreign language; it prospers at its most beautiful, and I would like to say, exclusively, in its inherited and bequeathed vernacular on the soil of its own nation.⁶ Language forms the heart of a people, and is it not a great idea to plant the seeds of well-being for the distant future among so many peoples, the Hungarians, Slavs, Wallachians,⁷ etc., quite in line with their own thinking, in their very own and most favorite way?

[...]

J. G. Herder, *Briefe zur Beförderung der Humanität. Erste Sammlung*. [Letters for the Advancement of Humanity. First Collection.] Riga: Johann Friedrich Hartknoch, 1793.

⁵ *Idiot* in the original, "one of the simple masses" as the intellectuals viewed the little-educated population at large.

⁶ *Nation* in the original.

⁷ I.e., the Romanians.